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ABSTRACT

Educators should be aware that recent rhetoric about diversity in this country often does not consider the continuing discrimination and mistreatment of Asians. Simply put, the employment situation for Asian and Pacific Americans is characterized by underemployment and the channeling of Asians into a narrow range of jobs. Many people today have developed stereotypes of the Asian populations; further, they are ignorant of some of the basic attributes of the Asian culture. For instance, Asians belong to the heritage of collectivism, which requires that the individual's goals be subordinated to that of the whole group. It is also a system in which people are patient with vertical relationships or power differences. Some of the myths and misconceptions about Asians are as follows: (1) that all Asians are alike; (2) that all Asians are successful; (3) that Asians are not aggressive; and (4) that Asians are poor communicators. In one reported case, a successful Asian man, whose distinguished career was documented by good evaluations and two promotions, was dismissed from his job by a new boss who thought he had communication problems. It is important that Americans come to terms with some of the misunderstandings about Asians. Politically disenfranchised, economically discriminated against, and socially ostracized, the majority of Asians work diligently against all odds of discriminatory practices for survival in all works of life in this great country of America. (TB)

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COPING WITH ALIENATION IN THE WORK PLACE: THE STORIES OF ASIAN AMERICANS

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INTRODUCTION

The subject of diversity has become the most popular word in the public life of people in this country. It is said that the strength of this nation is rooted in diversity as depicted in the "melting pot," "mosaic" or "salad bar" of varieties in race, ethnicity, gender, disability, age and socioeconomic level in higher education as well as the USA society at large. However, people of minority status continues to struggle for equality treatment with a tremendous difficulty. Among them, the Asian Americans have a unique problem of their own.

Historically, the discrimination of Asian Americans has a long duration for over one hundred years. In 1882, the Chinese Exclusion Act precluded the Chinese laborers from full participation in American work force. "A Chinaman's chance" was not an empty saying, it meant no chance at all. In 1942, the Japanese incarceration occurred. Thousands of Japanese American citizens were confined in prison camp after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Not until the year 1952, the Asian Americans immigrants were ever granted permanent residency status. In 1965 the new immigration act began to give more liberal treatments to people of the Asian decent. Today the Asian Americans represent a growing cultural and economic presence, they are the fastest growing, wealthiest and most educated minority population in America. Especially noteworthy is their success in the area of

higher education. Harvard University's freshman class averages 12 percent Asian Americans. The University of California Berkeley's student body is 25 percent Asian Americans, and Massachusetts Institute of Technology is 22 percent. However, according to the Christian Science Monitor, the image of "model minority" actually does more harm than good. Because of the image, they are becoming targets of racial hate-crimes and are suffering more and more discrimination in the area of underemployment. The paper intends to explore the myths and realities of Asian Americans in the work place and the patterns of discrimination practices against them with the hope of finding possible programs and strategies in the future for helping them becoming fully assimilated into the American society.

Asian Americans: A Definition and the Cultural Heritage

Asian Americans include: (1) Immigrants and decedents of immigrants from China, Japan, Korea, Philippine, Indo-China and South-east Asia; (2) Oceanic and Pacific islanders of US occupied territories; and (3) children of mixed marriages, one of the parents is Asian. These Asians can be divided into two distinctive groups: the longtime residents in the U.S. and the newly arrived immigrants because the difference in problems faced by them. The problem of discrimination against longtime residents is far more subtle. We are finding it in the problems of promotion and in the social customs within various localities. For example, although there is clearly a legal right to purchase a

home wherever they please, with whatever resources that they have,. there are subtle ways in which this is discouraged. Whereas in the case of the newly arrived immigrant, the problem is that of language, problems in education, employment, and in finding housing. Children of some newly arrived Asian immigrants were placed with the mentally retarded in schools because of their inability to cope with the English language, College professor denying students to attend class on the ground that students would not be able to understand the lectures were two of the examples of discrimination.

Culturally, Asian Americans belong to the heritage of Collectivism. It is characterized by individuals subordinating their personal goals to the collective they belong to. A key belief of people in the collective cultures is that the smallest unit of survival is the collective. When personal goals and the goals of the collective are in conflict, it is the duty of the individual to suppress their personal goals in favor of the goals of the collective. Individuals exist for the purpose of serving the ever-lasting existence and well being of the collective. The Characteristics of collective cultures are: (1) individuals as interdependent entities, they exist for the purpose of promoting an ideal society which is composed of a group of dutiful individuals who know their proper place and work harmoniously together for the everlasting existence of the collective in countless years to come; (2) hierarchism, people are more positive toward vertical relationship and more accepting of power difference;

(3) cooperativeness, they are obligated to appear non-threatening to others and to cooperate diligently for the common good of the collective; and (4) self denial, tolerance, modesty, moderation are highly praised virtues for successful social navigation.

In order to assure group cohesiveness and solidarity, the individuals are taught to conform and to submit. Self-expression is discouraged. A self of this nature is highly non-assertive, they seek to accommodate others and in return receive enduring social support. Modesty and reserve are insisted upon as guidelines of appropriateness in self-expression. They prefer people who are demure and quiet, the general attitude of people toward language and verbalization is fewer words, supported by the aesthetics of vagueness, are better than more words.

Myths and Stereotypes: Because of the basic cultural and racial differences, the understanding of the general public concerning the Asian Americans are limited to stereotypes. Many of these stereotypes has become basis and excuses for discrimination in the work place where the lives of the Asians intertwined with the lives of the general American public.

(1) All Asian Americans are alike: Although the Asian Americans share the same cultural concept of collectivism, they are very different in many ways. For one, they are two distinct groups, the long-term residents and the new immigrants, they face different problems when attempting Assimilation into the society. Secondly, they are from different national origins, with very

different languages, customs, and attitudes. Lumping them into one entity is risking over-simplification.

(2) All Asians are successful, they don't need any help from us: Because of the high number of presence of the Asian men in technical, professional, and managerial positions resulted from the recruitment of the war-time related industries after World War II, they have given the false image of success for all Asians. According to Christian Science Monitor and other news reports, the Asian professionals received statistically less salaries, enjoyed less rapid rate of career advancement, and the range of their job opportunities were limited to race-typed occupations--engineering, accounting, and health technology for men and clerical work for women. Very few Asian Americans were employed as public officials, or the police, whose work or decision affect the larger community at large. In addition, over 14% of Asian families have an annual income of less than ten thousand dollars. In this complex bureaucratic system of employment, there is modern racism--the subtle, sophisticated, systematic patterns of practices which may have no indication of malevolent intent, nonetheless, function to affect and to obscure discriminatory outcomes.

(3) Asian Americans are not aggressive: Because the cultures in Asia promote modesty and tolerance as virtues, most Asians are hesitant in asserting their rights. Many employers have used this stereotype to their advantage to justify excluding Asian American men and women from occupying positions with more respon-

sibility, decision-making power, and higher salaries. They argue that Asian/Pacific Americans do not have the executive qualities needed to lead. In the workplace of academia, Asian Americans are discriminated even when their academic superiority and competitiveness remained unquestioned, for they are perceived by their peers as having "inferior" personal characteristics. As a result, their academic credentials remained "undervalued." Furthermore, the image also leads them to believe that if they do not pay them equal wages, or do not promote them as fast or as high as others, they will not cause any trouble any way. It is a smart way to get cheap labor with excellent performance.

Data provided by the California Fair Employment Practice Commission in 1979, out of the 5326 complaints docketed, 4,500 were filed by African American clients, 1,200 by Hispanic clients, and only 378 by Asian Americans. While the total number of Asian complaints continues to rise, the percentage of such complaints received overall remain fairly constant over the years, approximately 7 to 8 percent. The bulk of the complaints were received from Asians involved in upgrading or promotions. American born Chinese or Japanese, for example, may find it easy to get jobs, but are blocked off from promotional opportunities. The kinds of reasons employers give for not promoting, and in some cases not hiring for entry level jobs, fall into certain patterns. One employer, for example, claimed that his failure to promote an Asian worker was because he was a good researcher, but like most Asians, he was not action minded and probably could not make the

decision required of a manager. This ties with the stereo type that Asians are too studious or two clannish, and that Asians are not aggressive enough.

Asian Americans are incompetent communicators:

Even when Asians speak fluent English, they are often described as lacking communication skills. A case in point. an Asian man who worked 6 years in one of the counties in California filed a complaint against his employer for unlawful discrimination. After a distinguished career documented by good evaluation reports and two promotions, a new supervisor decided that this same person had communication skill problems, and recommended in his written evaluation report the complainant should stop speaking his native language at home. Then, the new supervisor eventually terminated him from his position. The Fair Employment Commission found that he suffered from unlawful discrimination, and has ordered reinstatement and back pay. Although, it is questionable whether being gregarious and talkative are relevant to a person's job performance, it has been used as an important element in job evaluation of many Asian Americans.

CONCLUSION

In short, the employment situation for Asian and Pacific Americans is characterized by underemployment and the channeling of Asian workers into a narrow range of jobs. Discriminatory practices systematically exclude the population from many occupa-

tional areas. Unemployment is low for Asian-Americans because many of them are willing to take menial jobs at wage level below what many other Americans are willing to work for. Many Asian workers have two or more jobs. This, and the presence of multiple workers in the family, make it possible for Asian families to support themselves in low income communities. For Asians, underemployments rather than unemployment is the appropriate index of employment concerns. Politically disenfranchised, economically discriminated, and socially ostracized, the majority of Asians work diligently against all odds of discriminatory practices for survival in all works of life in this great country of America. Perhaps they do deserve to be recognized as the "model minority," not for their success, but for their powerful will, a will to endure and hence, to survive. We as a society has the responsibility to encourage their full participation in all works of American life.

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